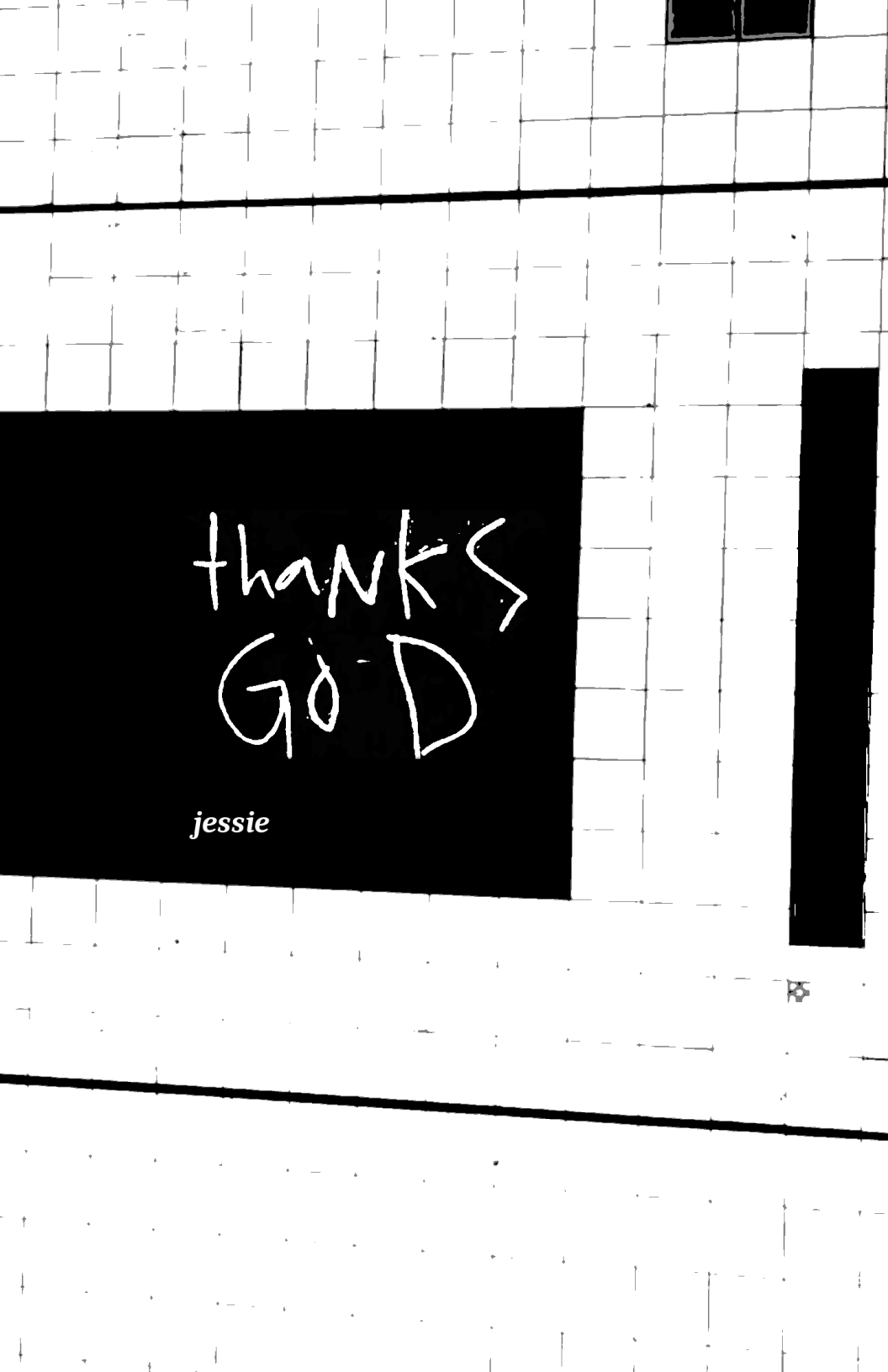
thanks
GOD
jessie

*thanks god*

*-jessie*

*3. vacuum*
*4. Yellows*
*14. we're just*
*15. squirrel in park*
*16. cloud watching*
*17. a shared moment*
*on a park bench*
*18. credit*
*20. left behind*
*28. Bargain bin*
*31. eminem ft. royce da 5'9"*
*32. neuropathy*
*33. dose*
*35. tripping, stumbling, collapsing*
*37. Our Breath Will Carry Us Forward*
*38. When We Don't Have The Strength*
*39. To Carry Ourselves*
*40. type*
*41. statistically likely heartache*
*43. interlude*
*44. fake L.A. (total xanarchy)*
*45. 1312*
*46. west*
*47. almost home*
*48. What The Queers Are Doing To The Soil*
*51. slippage*
*52. chart_with_upwards_trend*
*53. that time my friend charlie kicked a duck in the park*
*54. what it feels like*
*55. morvern callar*
*56. erosions*
*57. approximating*
*58. a study*
*59. Martin Prince singing "Summer Wind" in The Simpsons*
*61. peanuts and brand name snacks*
*62. scene*
*63. mixtape*
*64. september 9*
*65. resolution*
*66. bus home*
*67. soft thaw*
*69. chinese and american food to take out*
*71. national weather service*
*72. delaware*
*76. note*
*77. lifecycle*
*78. star wars, 1999*
*79. crossing*
*80. missouri, nevada*
*81. Last contact*
*88. plot*

*vacuum*

something has been taking the wind
out of every room I walk into

gasping, choking on nothing
no one else seems to mind

kneeling down on the floor
my hands in my own vomit
my glasses knocked off my face

are you okay
no, I suspect a man
with a big vacuum is following me
and taking the wind
out of the rooms I am in

I try to stand
are you okay
I've already explained this
collapsed in my own sick

*Yellows*

The smoke wafting in front of me reminds me of her, it's been years since we've spoken.

The smell from the dumpster is overpowering until she lights her cigarette. I pretend I'm out of smokes. I say the word "smokes" asking for one, I think that's the first time I've said the word "smokes" unironically. She gives me one. She's very pretty.

I'm trying my best not to cough. She's talking about Moby Dick, she's very smart, she's clearly very smart. I can't stop staring at her, but I know she can feel my eyes on her; people passing by stare at her, men linger. I've lost the thread, she's paused. I smile, she smiles back, takes a drag, asks how I've been, I look at my feet.

I laugh and say "you know".

She smiles, a smaller one, it's pained. Looking at her own feet she says "yeah". She looks back up. Her eyes are blue.

"Money's been pretty tight." I say.

"Yeah, felt, same."

There are sparrows flitting in between trees, pigeons scavenging or maybe just idly pecking at trash the same way I eat when I'm bored. I feel like pigeons in the city don't really struggle with food but more cars and callousness and disease, maybe cats. I assume I'm hearing the sparrows chirping but I don't know birdcalls. It's warm but there's a breeze.

"Are these american spirits?" I cough.

She laughs, says they are, yellows. I don't know what that means.

The birdcalls again. She's looking at me. I feel the pressure of her gaze lock me up, my elbow bends stiffly.

"Do you usually smoke?"

I feel like I am blowing up. I want to lie.

I want to lie.

"No-"

She laughs, I think I might actually be blowing up.

"Well, weed"

"I meant cigarettes."

"No, not really."

"Not really?"

"Well sometimes, like when I'm drunk, or like my 18th birthday."

I'm nothing but a crater and gore.

"Your 18th birthday?"

"Yeah I don't know, I turned 18 and it seemed like a thing to do you know, register for the draft, smoke some cigarettes." The breeze has slowed and I can feel sweat from my brow seeping into my hat. "I went to the gas station and asked for a cigar. The guy was like, you gotta say what kind. I pointed to some black and milds." I really wish she would stop laughing, but she's even prettier when she's happy and it's hard to be too embarrassed. "I smoked them in front of my dorm."

We finish the conversation, our cigarettes; her shift is over, she heads out. I head back into the library, shelve books for 3 more hours smelling like American Spirits, 'yellows'.

I had her pop up on instagram yesterday, I didn't add her. I don't even know where she lives now. We never really talked more than on smoke breaks, we did hang out a few times. I'm looking at a discarded empty pack of American Spirits, "yellows". I quit 6 months ago. I ended up smoking Marlboro Reds. I didn't like thinking about her when I smoked American Spirits. The weather is similar to that first smoke break, late spring/early summer. Pigeons still fumble with garbage, I still fumble with my life. Her name was Brittany, mine has changed since transition, I don't think she's into women.

A couple blocks away another woman is walking home. We talked about some movies she likes, life, I'm desperately crushing on her too.

The sweat on my brow is mingling with my hair, which I've grown out. I feel ugly thinking about the woman walking home, about Brittany, about a string of other women, violent explosions, emotional gore. A sparrow flies very fast into the tree behind me

and I flinch as it whips past my head. Someone pushing a shopping cart laughs at me; I smile, wave, he does the same.

I walk into a corner store

"Hey boss." I hate when this happens.

"Could I get a pack of marlboro reds." The word Marlboro always swishes around my mouth like a loose filling, I've always had a hard time with R's.

"Actually-" I've changed my mind, he turns back to face me, "american spirits?"

"What kind"

"yellows?"

He slaps the pack on the counter, 18 bucks. I flinch, pull out a 20.

Smoking in the park is technically illegal, the same way it's illegal to have an open container. I'm more deterred by the idea of secondhand smoke and being a good neighbor. The woman walking home likes to joke about "smokers being the most oppressed class", it's funny but she makes the joke a lot, she always laughs so brilliantly at it, her whole face lights up. I think if she stabbed me repeatedly I would find it charming.

'thank you jesus!' is scrawled on the wall of a building on my way home. It seems sarcastic at first and then I realize it is someone who is unwell sincerely thanking jesus. I mutter "thank you jesus" under my breath. I can feel a scratch in my throat from the cigarettes. I feel my breast pocket for them, almost smoke another before I toss the pack on the ground. 18 bucks down the drain, money's still tight. "thank you jesus", I say it again, laugh a little at how absurd it all is.

I have a weeks old healing blister on my right foot, I can feel the pavement through the sole of my shoes, digging into the raw skin. I'm limping a little. I step on something slick and start to lose my footing, I hit the ground. Someone almost steps over me but decides to go around. I wonder if they heard me muttering thank you jesus. I laugh, not because anything is funny.

"You ok?"

It's Brittany, I think, I recognize her from her profile picture. I'm having a hard time believing it.

"What?"

"you ok?"

"are you-"

"oh yeah, I am Brittany hi yeah, how are you?"

"I'm good, do you-"

"yeah no I recognize you! I've seen you on instagram."

We talk a little, it's nice, surreal, she moved to the city recently too, has been trying to make friends. I say we should hang out, she smiles in a way that makes it feel like I have fallen down again. She says she would like that.

"Actually, I'm about to go back to my place? If you wanted to walk with me?"

I must have hit my head. I say yes, but try to be cool about it, even though I'm definitely not that cool about it. She grabs my hand, I can't think.

We walk for what feels like an hour, or 20 minutes, or 3 days. Graffiti is commented on, we talk about books. She's reading Ulysses, I joke around about being impressed, I am actually impressed. We keep walking, my hand is sweaty in hers, I'm sure she notices. Her hand is soft, gentle against mine, I try not to grip too hard, but when I'm not paying attention I can feel my own become a vice. She takes me down a side street, I lose focus on my hand. She looks at me, says "hey". Her hair is falling across her face, brown, thick, curly, she brushes it behind her ear. She grabs my other hand and we kiss, her hands wander.

Someone rounds the corner behind us.

"Oh!"

I snap back away from Brittany, her hand lingers in the small of my back. In my haste I pulled her hair back in front of her face, she brushes it away and shoots a warm expression at them.

"Don't mind me" they say and chuckle, walking down the street past us.

Brittany says we're almost at hers, that it's actually right there, she points across the street. The complex is a converted brownstone. They've refinished the classic facade with an ugly modernist gray thing, it looks expensive. Her apartment is the third floor. It doesn't have much of a view, but it gets good light.

We sleep together, she's beautiful, apparently into women, or whatever she sees me as. I run moments through my head as she lays asleep next to me. I get up to use the bathroom. The motion wakes her.

"Where are you going?"

"Oh, just the bathroom."

She doesn't move her head during this exchange, falling back asleep almost right away. The good light is gone. Her oven says it's 3am. The living room is tasteful, feminine, but only around the edges. Plants everywhere, a comfortable couch, a too small TV. I think of my own living room, I tell myself it's not as feminine, I feel stupid for being so self hating. The bathroom is more sparse, less taste involved. I check behind the mirror, syringes, needles, injection supplies, vials of estrogen. I chuckle to myself, I must not be her only partner. I pause, it was pretty dark when we were together. I never did know Brittany too well. I cuddle back up against her.

Morning light through her blinds, it gets caught in her brown hair, now a little mussed. Strands shimmer, retreat into a larger brown mass, it drapes across a face I can't see. Eventually she wakes up on her own, she feels my hand respond to her movement.

"hey" she rotates around and kisses me. I kiss her back, she kisses me hard.

I say something about probably needing to go, her hand wanders.

She makes us breakfast. We sit at the tiny table she has, some plant I ask her about in the center. She tells me about the genus or species or something, it's cute. I say I should go, she puts

on some coffee, says I should stay, that she has nothing to do. Her hair is still mussed, her eyes heavy with missed sleep, she smiles.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, sure"

"I don't want to be like weird-"

"Emma. It's fine, I said you could ask me." That laugh I remember, subtler, older, carrying more weight.

"I saw some estrogen in the bathroom?"

"Oh my god that's so embarrassing-"

I blush, look at my feet, the leaves of the plant trailing off the table, waxy in the sunlight. She continues, I look back up, she says it was for an old partner, she hasn't had the heart to get rid of it. I ask if she's poly, she says she's never tried it. She asks if I'm poly, I almost say something about being unable to sustain meaningful relationships before I laugh and just say "same".

I'm brushing my hair out of my eyes. The humidity of the day, or apartment, or something, has made it frizzy and large, it keeps sliding out from behind my ears.

Brittany interjects into a silence that almost prompts me to leave, "can I cut your hair?". I say yes without thinking.

Her hands feel nice. I can tell by the way it's falling that my hair is greasy, I haven't showered yet.

"Do you know what you want?"

"Not really, just a trim maybe, I don't know, do whatever."

She laughs, grabs some scissors. There's a trash bag cut open and laid on the floor. You can hear the upstairs neighbor's footsteps if you listen closely. She's cutting pretty high up now, there's no mirror, I assume she's layering. I look over at her, she tells me not to move my head. I wish she would kiss me. We're silent again as she cuts more. The footsteps are still there, it seems like they're pacing. A truck drives by and shakes the building, and drowns out the footsteps. I feel her hands comb through a greasy knot, it stops very short.

"How short did you cut it?"

"oh pretty short! I thought it would look good! butch!" she smiles, kisses me. "Just a second I have a compact or something

somewhere." she starts rooting through a drawer in the bathroom hands me a travel mirror.

The haircut is very short.

"What do you think?"

I look at her over my shoulder in the mirror, say I like it to her pleading face. She grabs my waist, pulls me close before I can start to say I should leave again.

Afternoon, I wake up next to her, I slept a lot. I think to the pill bottles I saw next to the estrogen vials. I took care not to inventory them out of respect for Brittany's privacy. She's on her computer across from the bed, scrolling some website. She hears me wake up, turns around.

"I really should be going" I say, I move my hand to flip my hair and grab nothing, a pit in my stomach. Brittany laughs, says I look pretty. I look at the ground. She sits next to me on the bed, rubs my back.

"You still smoke weed?"

I laugh, tell her I mostly quit.

"I'm gonna go smoke a cigarette on the roof if you want to join me?"

I figure I can smoke a cigarette and leave. I grab my jacket, put on shoes. I'm trying not to be upset with Brittany. She's shirtless, throwing on something she was wearing before, we kiss. I smell my own shirt.

The view on the roof is breathtaking. We're deep in Brooklyn, rows and rows of brownstone roofs and hidden implied corner stores, the towers of downtown Brooklyn, downtown Queens; the jewel of a distant Manhattan, light gleaming off it even from all the way back here. The roof is hot, there's not much of a breeze. I feel my jacket pocket for my American Spirits, they're gone. I still have my lighter.

"Uh, can I bum a smoke?"

Brittany laughs, I almost tell her I've actually been smoking for years now because of her, but catch myself. I laugh too. She passes me a smoke. I light it.

We talk about something unimportant. My vision starts to fade, she's looking deep into my eyes. I trail off. What were we talking about.

"You're so pretty- " I try to say this to Brittany, but my tongue slurs into something unintelligible. I drop the cigarette. She snuffs it out, smiles at me, looks into eyes. I feel her catch me as I collapse.

When I wake up I can't move, I'm tied to the bed. My body feels numb, dull. Some stupid lizard part of my brain finds it erotic, the same part that's sending me into a life or death panic, I struggle a little bit. It smells like alcohol and blood, like a hospital. I hear shuffling in the living room. Brittany comes in. She's smiling. I strain hard with both hands, lift my torso up, but the effort exhausts my core and I collapse back into the bed. The sheets still smell like her.

"How are you?"

I don't know what to say. She smiles, I notice her inflamed gums. She smokes too much.

"I took the liberty of removing your breasts."

I feel how groggy I am through a bolt of panic, I snap my head to my chest. She laughs at the violence of the movement.

I try to speak but it's mostly mush, she laughs at how unintelligible it is.

"You're going to be feeling that for a while." she says, turning around to root through her vanity.

She turns back around.

She says I'm so handsome.

I'm completely frozen. She straddles me, I thrash. She pins my hands down, I'm weak enough that it doesn't take her much effort. She leans in close to my face, I turn away. She kisses my cheek.

Something cold across my throat. Something warm down my neck.

She says an old name, I look her in the eyes. They're still the same blue.

She leans in again, I can smell the cigarette still. There's a pain in my neck that's more of a sensation than anything directly unpleasant.

I feel her breath on my lips, the sensation starts to fade.

I kiss her.

Out back at some venue. Some show I can't remember, bands I don't care about, years ago. I'm surrounded by friends that I haven't spoken to for a while, they're all trans. We're smoking weed, cigarettes, drinking beer. Someone is doing ketamine behind a dumpster. I transitioned recently. You can hear cicadas, droning, swelling.

There's a phenomenon called "acoustic beating" that produces the swell of cicadas. Alone they would be a single drone, steady, trilling slightly with the rapid motion of their wings and exoskeletons. But together they all orbit the same note, never quite deciding on a definitive sound. This orbit causes their drones to crash and fold into each other, swelling as consensus is almost reached on a note and then dissolving into something less concrete. Standing on the blacktop I listen to the ebb and flow of this drone, my friends punctuating it with their laughter.

thank you jesus

*we're just*

I don't
smoke
I don't
you shake your head a little bit before you say drink
and then we both almost shout at least I can fucking think
and I can't stop
fucking running you
through my head
on that walk
singing minor threat
as you stepped over a curb
to hop a fence with me
and I can't stop thinking
about how inconvenient it is
to feel like this
I don't
smoke
I don't
drink
and I'm fucked up on my own
and I can't fucking
think about anything
I'm falling out of step

*squirrel in park*

you walk up to me
and you duck your head
to see if I'm maybe
someone who has food around,
I shift my weight and scare you
and you come back to double check
I laugh, but I don't think
you get it, so you leave
and there are songbirds
and crows and you and your
friends are scampering
around a tree
someone shuffles past
on a slow jog and I lose
track of you

I hope you're keeping well
but I'm not sure if you
think of me anymore

*cloud watching*

recently,
I feel like I'm floating away
from anything that matters
loose on the wind
scraping against asphalt
I wish I was airborne

lying, battered on the road
lucid for a second, I'm alone

bathed in streetlight,
the stars blotted out,
I'm alone

*a shared moment*
*on a park bench*

they sat next to me
and a discarded smoothie
left to rot in the sun,
now setting

they look out at the park
and seem lonely while I read,
pretending not to notice
the same ache
I have been hiding

the setting sun is no longer poking
through the canopies of trees
as they walk away
-
we left each other alone

*credit*

my phone buzzes
across the room
on the dresser
it's loud, rattling against wood
  the person who used to live here
gave that dresser to me
it still doesn't feel like mine

citi bank balance reward points
are available, for my convenience

I'm taking inventory
a guitar or two
a chair I'll throw out
a mattress I spent too much on
that I will have to throw out
my books
a stack of cassettes

I picture the next room,
I'll be staring at the ceiling
blank walls, a fledgling social circle,
my phone buzzing,
will citi bank still be there for me
for my convenience
I clear the notification
I stare at the ceiling
until I fall asleep

I can't stand, I've never been this stoned. I look over at Joe, sunk into the couch too. Something's on the tv. He returns my glance, we lock eyes and smile like there's some big secret only we understand. There's smoke drifting through his parent's floorboards, filling the house with the stench of our bong hits. His parents pretend not to notice, returning their courtesy we pretend not to notice their attempt at constructing a believable fiction.

A week later he calls me.

"Iowa dude!" Joe's voice comes through my phone speaker, peaking the mic, garbled, only blocks away pouring from his mouth into the receiver on his own phone.

"what?"

"Iowa"

"oh holy shit, you got in?"

"yeah, just got the letter." he pretends to be less excited than he is. We talk some more. I take my bike to his place. We smoke the biggest joint we can roll, weed is all over the carpet, it's a lost cause. I try to celebrate with him, but I find myself caught up in my own performances. I haven't gotten in anywhere yet, the only applications I have still outstanding are to 'stretch schools', as my guidance counselor put it.

Two months later I get my final rejection letter. I sign up for the local community college. I feel like the butt of some sort of cosmic joke for a second, wallowing. Soon I realize being the butt of this joke would assign myself too much importance. It's depressing but I find some liberation in it, nothing matters. Joe visits on summers, over christmas, etc.

Over summer break we're walking back from the Circle K down the block from his house, he's a sophomore now. I'm a sophomore too, technically, or whatever the fuck you become in your second year of community college.

Freshly 21, Joe is carrying a six pack he bought for the both of us. We've been drinking a lot this summer. Joe especially, I feel like I'm just along for the ride. I prefer marijuana anyways.

"No hangover dude." We're debating the finer points as we walk.

"yeah, whatever, I know, it's just, it's soooo fucking boring."

"ok, whatever," I laugh "I guess I'll just keep this to myself." I pull an eighth in a film canister out of my jacket. The canister is opaque, but Joe knows me well enough to know I'm not into photography. He exhales through his nose as he smiles. He shakes his head.

On his porch we pass a joint, crack into the beers. He's been having a fun semester, some wild parties. He ended up in the drunk tank once. He starts mentioning people the way we used to mention the people we knew in high school.

Something interrupts us overhead with a deep bellow. All the trees rustle violently. We're both startled. It seems like a helicopter almost, like from the movies, the foliage bending under the force of its propeller, and then it's gone.

"what the fuck?"

"was that real?"

We're both standing. I make sure I'm still holding the joint we just rolled. We stay frozen for a second, searching the horizon. The soundscape is returning to normal. All the trees standing straight, rustling gently now in the cool breeze of the summer night.

We decide it has to have been some sort of 'military shit'. "There's an airbase not too far from here." I say uncertain, wanting to be more sure. We look it up on our phones. There's nothing close enough, but we're both willing to pretend there is.

It comes back minutes later. Joe swears, runs out into the yard. I follow. There's some lights over the cornfield next door. The bass filled drone it makes is hard to hear over. Joe is saying something.

"what?"

He points at the lights, shouting, glancing between me and the object in the sky.

As my eyes adjust to the light of the yard it's clear that it's some sort of plane, or helicopter, or something. I'm grasping for the rational.

Something shoots out of it, engulfs Joe.

Light fills the yard, it's warm. He rises towards it. I'm standing still, I want to do anything, something. My mind is racing but my body refuses to follow. He drifts higher into the sky.

My finger starts to burn, I'm still holding the joint, now a roach. I drop it into the grass, wet with dew. Joe's moving faster now.

I run inside, I shout for his parents. Through the window I see him fade into one of the lights on the craft like it's some sort of membrane. I knock on their bedroom door. His dad opens it, half awake, a little startled. He makes a face like he smells something. I realize it's weed and booze.

"Joe's gone." I say, panicking.

"What?"

"Joe, he, I don't fucking know"

I try to recount the story to his parents.

They seem skeptical, concerned. I try to walk it back. His beer is still on the porch. They think he's wandered into the corn. I think about insisting on the abduction, but I start to realize what I'm saying. I lie, maybe he did walk into the corn. As we move through the field, calling out, I start to believe in it. The coarse stalks tear a hole in my jeans. We give up eventually and end up huddled around the kitchen table. They call the cops. I try calling Joe, nothing. The cops show up after an hour, they say to file a missing report and we do. A week passes, nothing happens.

Joe's gone.

I write this phrase down in my diary one night, I stop for a second and stare at it. I try to find some more meaning, it's all I can get down.

I should sleep.

I'm laying on my back, my journal by my side. The single lamp I have next to my bed has light spreading out across the ceiling radiating in ellipses from behind the shade. It catches on my spackled ceiling, shadows growing longer as angles become more acute.

What do I have.

What is there?

My parents sure, but I haven't talked to them in months.

My nice-but-doesn't-pay-enough job at the library shelving books.

I'm one year away from a degree, but I don't know that I won't just drop out and fester; wonder where the time is going as I watch it slip into nothing, pretending there's meaning there, in that oblivion.

I sleep.

Nightmares again, about Joe. So vivid it feels like they were beamed straight into my skull.

It's 5am. I stay up, make coffee, get to class, try to keep my head down.

I get home, hungry, lunch was from a vending machine. I look at my almost empty fridge, my almost empty pantry. I don't know what to do. I sit on the couch. I sleep there. This is the texture of my life for the next month. I lose my job. I flunk out. Sometimes I stand outside, listening for that bellow, looking for those lights. I don't know what's going on in my head. Everything feels like goo, I grab it and it slips through my fingers slowly, back into the mess it came from.

For a while I'm able to tell myself what his parents have been saying, he wandered off drunk, got lost. They've been searching.

It's been two months, not many people stay alive and lost for two months.

There's a casket in the center of the room, even though they never found a body. Some of Joe's friends from college are

here, I recognize a few from the names floating around in conversation. I don't say anything. I'm standing in a corner. His parents asked me if I wanted to speak, give a speech or something, I said no.

One of his friends is crying, another puts his hand on her shoulder, says something. She looks over and smiles. I don't know that I was even Joe's friend anymore, when it all happened, what I meant to him. We loved each other I think. We had said so at one pint; I remind myself this, it feels like it doesn't matter.

"hello"

There's a screech, feedback from the microphone. It's his mom. She starts it off, says some nice things about Joe. A slideshow plays, there's a few photos of us as kids. A birthday, mini golf with grandma, a photo of us at that kitchen table, eyes bloodshot, a big pile of fast food in front of us. His college friends laugh politely. One looks at me, smiles. I can feel tears, this is so stupid.

I step out, ostensibly for air. One of his classmates walks up to me. They're hanging out later, ask if I want to come, if I can bring some weed.

At home, I pack whatever I have left, something like an eighth, into that film canister. I get dressed and on a bus to the center of town.

I've always liked this bar, 'The Blind Pig': Old, wood everywhere, lots of booths, a dartboard. It's mostly populated by a bunch of burnouts: Burnout middle aged men fleeing their home-life, burnout punks stuck in this nowhere-shithole, burnout townies who never had the fantasy of leaving, and the occasional handful of insufferable college kids. I can spot them immediately, loud, drunk, beautiful, young, decidedly not burned out. "hey"

"hey! Dylan right?"

"yeah" I try to smile.

Someone pulls out a seat. I explain I'm Joe's friend from way back. Someone says he talked about me. I feel something tight

in my chest. I down a beer, a shot, another beer, some more. We go to roll a joint out front.

The street is covered in the orange of the  fluorescent lights overhead. A trickle of red and blue from a neon pabst blue ribbon logo is caught in a puddle on the pavement. The joint is in rotation. I sparked it. Waiting for my turn I stare at the window. The burnouts are framed by the wood paneling dividing each pane of glass into so many tiny squares, catching the orange street lamps. The light is more yellow in the reflection.

A faint rumble.

I ignore it. They're talking about some album. I say I've heard of it, but I haven't listened. The rumble grows louder. I glance at the sky.

A breeze.

"You okay Dylan?"

"Yeah, it's ju-"

The rumble becomes overpowering, I trail off, Lights pass by overhead. Before anyone can even ask what the fuck that was I take off. Some of them take off after me. It's hovering above an empty plot a couple hundred yards away.

I'm sprinting, I can feel fatigue creep up for a second. Someone shouts my name and I'm able to put it from my mind. I'm still going, it's still there.

The bass filled whump it's emitting is enveloping me now, I'm close. Everyone behind me has stopped running, unsure of what to do. Unsure of how safe it is.

It's sleek, mostly cast in darkness, silver, a slight green to the lights on the undercarriage.

I stop. I turn around, people standing. I think back to that first encounter, how I locked up. They're all staring at the ship.

Something surrounds me; the empty field illuminated, the errata of this years soybean harvest laying
in the dirt.

The hairs on my arm prick up.

"Dylan!"

I look back at the crowd of people again, I can't place a single name.

I'm a couple inches off the ground now. I start to rotate mid-air.

I think about Joe, if he's still on this thing.

I can feel panic until something beams into my head, it feels like those nightmares I've been having, vivid. It fills my field of vision. But unlike the nightmares I feel a vague sense of calm, something soothing.

It's him, he says a sentence I can't make out, something on another frequency. It eventually comes into focus.

Through the static I can hear shouting. A breeze rolls across me. I think back to that night Joe disappeared, sitting in my bed afterwards, my life in pieces.

I must be near that membrane now, or at least near something.

I pass through it.

The breeze is gone.

He tells he's here with me, to relax, to stay calm. I let the words wash over me, I feel ground beneath my feet. My vision still obscured, I hear the shuffling of something approaching me.

Joe says not to resist.

Something sharp sticks in my gut. I reach for it and feel cold metal and flesh, something warm on my fingers. My vision starts to go.

He tells me it'll all be ok, I pretend it will be, my blood pouring to the floor.

*Bargain bin*

My left eye is outputting static again. Something to do with the latest update. I'm supposed to go in tomorrow but I can't afford the consultation anymore, let alone the probable repair. Online, people had been saying it was something to do with a mismatched voltage output to the older models.

I slam my hand into my temple, a flash of shape and color disorients me before it's back to static.

...

I finally got that consultation. The whole nerve has been fried by this cheap fucking implant, there's nothing to be done. The whole eye is now just a heap of useless flesh and plastic, mirrors to nowhere.

...

Chattering in my ear, I can hear my name. I swivel on the street, I see nothing. The chattering has faded, my stomach has bottomed out. I can feel my endocrine system interface with the implant and the ground is back under my feet.

...

My left eye has lost picture entirely. I slam my hand into my temple, nothing. I do it again, hard, I go at it until my head is swimming.

...

I ask for the toothpaste behind the glass, I turn my head to look as I point. My neck stops rotating. I shift my body to face the cabinet. The clerk doesn't seem to care how strange this looks.

"That one," I say, pointing, feeling something taut in my arm as I do.

They sigh and slide open the glass.

...

My neck is no longer functioning. I have to twist my torso to check for cars at intersections. Self conscious, I sometimes refuse to make the full, awkward rotation of my body. A Tesla almost hits me. They yell some profanity through their open window as they swerve.

...

Chattering again. I rip off my headphones, it carries on. I can make out my name still, some hushed sub vocalizations. A harsh whisper cuts through, "I'll fucking kill you", more voices join in, threats, paranoid snippets, it grows into a swell of white noise. I fall to the floor.

Trying to stand, my neck starts to lock up, so does one leg. I fall back down. I lay there for a stretch, paralyzed by white noise and muscles that are no longer under my control.

...

I manage to stand, make my way to my bed, I collapse. I'm laying on my back, facing the ceiling. The spackling and yellow lamp light remind me of my childhood bedroom in Missouri. My favorite snow-globe is probably resting on my dresser to this day. Through the doorway I can see a print of a painting my parents framed in a gesture to their ambitions of being people of culture, Nighthawks.

In the painting there's a man alone at a bar, then that same man on the other side of the bar with a woman. I always stared at the background. An empty city street, simple buildings fading into simple shapes. I wondered what life was like in that city, in those buildings. The white noise cuts out eventually, I'm able to sleep.

...

I haven't been able to leave my bed, my body is bricked or broken or something, there's a term they had been using on the news for it but I can't remember what it was. My phone is across the room, not that it would be much use to me now.

I'm staring at the ceiling. My left eye is still dead. The white noise comes and goes. There's a growing pit in my stomach, my mouth is dry, I've been unable to swallow for the most part.

...

A radiating pain starts to grow in my chest, my lungs are failing.

I try to brace for some sort of impact, but my body remains limp on my bed.

I think of that city, all those people, in all those simple shapes, background characters to that man's loneliness. I sputter. Life was supposed to be more than this.

*eminem ft. royce da 5'9"*

some people don't get better
some people do
some people stay the same
and die
not knowing if they were better
or worse or
something like that
or something different
than how it is
or how it was
how is anything
what does it mean etc
and so on
and life is flying by as you
contemplate it
some people don't get better
some people do

*neuropathy*

those cuffs pinched a nerve in my left hand and
stretching with my pinky,
reaching higher notes on my guitar,
it hurts now
I risk damaging it permanently
if I'm not careful
so I play without it,
still I sometimes cause it to spasm

and it doesn't hurt that much
but I think of those cops' hands on my body
and the cuffs
and the bruises that formed after
and so on,
this all becomes more of an exercise
I want to forget
I try to make a sound as ugly as i feel
but it's mostly just muted strings
and a few dissonant notes
it doesn't feel right at all

*dose*

I laugh to myself
it looks like someone
left mdma or meth
on the floor,
under my couch

It's still there a week later

a week later
a week later

I laugh to myself
when I take it
it's probably salt
caught in the groove of some
shoe, knocked onto my floor

a metallic taste,

it was more than I thought

my heart is racing
I'm monitoring my breath

narcan has some
off label uses

I sigh
I sigh again
my chest is tight

when is the peak
I take a photo of the narcan dose
next to me on the couch

a memorial for a moment
I read the instructions on the back

I realize this feeling
doesn't bother me anymore,
a rockface eroded back into the sea
it's quiet in my home

*tripping, stumbling, collapsing*

the yellow and red and creeping
dead browns in the leaves shake
in the wind and I see them spiral
and shimmer as the strings of
my guitar buzz against my fingers
and frets and wood, a dog runs after a ball
and the breeze is fading
but I am still experiencing visuals
and in the background I am chemically entering
a state that is clinically known as mania
although I don't really notice or understand or care
especially while I am on this much acid
on this beautiful day in the park
and it feels like the notes are shimmering
out and harmonizing with the vibrant yellows and reds
and dull browns

a little girl walks up to me
and says she just started playing guitar
and wants to play like me
I smile and feel warm and the entire world
feels like it is the same brilliant shade of yellow
in the leaves behind her head

I am unwell

*Our Breath Will Carry Us Forward*

On the ceiling of this aging psych ward there are worn felt squares. The way they are arranged reminds me vaguely of swastikas; the cops who brutalized me when they brought me here; this crumbling, cruel empire; the failing systems of care that I find myself in. Although saying the intent was ever care feels generous.

There's a weekly activity schedule on the glass booth the nurses sit behind. The only activities that happen off this schedule are meals and medication distribution. I've been spending my time pacing until I'm exhausted and sleeping until I can pace again. I can't focus enough to read, and writing feels profane in a place like this, trying to make meaning of it, something beautiful. As I pace I walk under the faux felt swastikas.

I haven't been able to shave, even after explaining what this means to a trans woman. As my stubble grows in it seems to matter less, it's easier to ignore a freak.

No one likes that I'm trans in here, it's an inconvenience at best, something that pulls you away from scrolling on your phone to perform labor for a hospital bureaucracy that treats you like shit. At its worst it makes apparent and visible the harm they are causing.

It seems like everyone has lies they are telling themselves to make the trauma of this place bearable. I'm passing under a felt fixture again. My legs hurt so much that I can barely think. I appreciate this.

*When We Don't Have The Strength*

I'm in a five point restraint in some backroom of 30th street station. My legs and arms shackled and those shackles connected to a bench. My memory is already slipping into illegibility. The cops will go home and have their accounting, but I am already losing mine.

The next morning my entire right bicep is a bruise. I'm worried my wrist is broken and not just strained. I worry playing guitar won't be the same. There's a bruise next to my breasts; another vicious one on my left bicep, smaller than the right. One of the cops kept grabbing me as hard as he could. I think I remember his face, but that's slipping away too. I can see the shape of his fingers in the bruises on my arms. The one on my right bicep you can make out the pores in his fingers, the gaps in skin providing relief from the force he was exerting. It hurts to sleep for a few days since cradling my head puts pressure on these bruises. As I write this I can still make out the shape of his hands on my body. Each morning my memory fades with them.

*To Carry Ourselves*

Tracy tried to kill herself. She tells me this and in her eyes I can tell that the feeling hasn't changed, the one that made her try to leave. I tell her I'm glad she's here, but it feels like a platitude or maybe even a lie. She has 9 grandkids, 5 kids, nowhere to go. They have to keep her in the psych ward for a while it looks like. She's explaining this to me as I get ready to leave. I think I can make out tears in her eyes, but I mostly see that same feeling I saw when I first met her.

Robert thinks we should do woodstock again. He loves that I'm a guitarist. His brain refuses to make the world legible for him, but he manages to be kind and warm and gentle all the same. I like to walk with him. I ask him about his family too and he becomes lucid, documenting the lives of the people he loves. All we have is each other he says. I want to cry but I don't want to make Robert sad. I agree I say. He smiles.

Most of the other patients are too unwell to hold a conversation, and the staff look at me like a sick animal. All we have is each other.

*type*

I have been finding I am the type
to listen to elliott smith at 4am
staring at the ceiling of course
and chainsmoking,
joints, of course,
cigarettes will kill you
fast, of course

and I know this is all so cliche and
the light in this room is the same
as it was then, fairy lights,
a frigid basement
a college dorm
i was too drunk to stand

and i often paint myself
as some sort
of chainsmoking joints
staring at the ceiling
listening to elliott smith
type, the "warm white"
LEDs mixing with the
blue light of a computer monitor,
5am now, sunlight through the far window soon
swirls of smoke like a thick dust
settling into the carpet

*statistically likely heartache*

there was a book I read
and the trans author mentions how many
of her trans friends kill themselves
and I had just come out
I reread the passage
until it was just words
and not a stabbing sensation in my head

a friend is gone and
I want to send her a message
to make sure,
we had drifted
but we talked about writing and life
and she was kind and smart
and she's dead now

my last apartment the doorknob
could support my weight well enough, probably

I don't want to be a blinking cursor
on someone else's screen

*interlude*

dude the 90s called
yeah it was you as a kid,
they asked if it all turned out like you hoped,
yeah i told them,
yeah no it was like watching a flower wilt dude

I joke a lot about destroying children in a game of basketball
and I think it has to do with when
we accidentally had a team of
middle schoolers play against our high school team
and I swatted some like 10 year old's three pointer
into the bleachers

my unruly teen is becoming a bluesman
and dedicating his life to wandering around the mississippi delta
with nothing but a guitar and his word
instead of becoming a doctor

in therapy, bells go off, the room lights up,
the ceiling is flashing different colors,
I'm actually in Cash Therapy
the only show where you compete in therapy for real cash prizes

well bro looks like that bull is about to gore us
it's like my grandpa always said when he was gored to death
"oh god oh god no oh god ough my stomach, ougaiudsghhhhhh"

*fake L.A. (total xanarchy)*

in the ocean of life
there are so many
clout sharks
  he slams his fist into
his palm to emphasize
how many clout sharks,
are clout sharks
even real
-
I'm laying on my back
floating in this shit
and it feels like I'll
never find land again
adrift forever

we're gonna need a bigger boat

*1312*

blocks away cops are probably
calling it all in,

they asked if I had a problem with the police
I asked if they had a problem with trans people
and if I was under arrest
they said no
but they wouldn't let me go

ducking through alleys, I'm under-dressed
they have my coat my guitar my computer, all my stuff
I'm not getting it back

at a gas station I grab a charger, I'm standing in line

a cop dismounts a bike out front

I walk out the door across the street,
they're following,
excuse me you have to pay-

a mail truck blocks their line of sight,
there are years of jail time on the other side and I bolt

decades of jail time now

the truck pulls away and I'm gone

I am dehydrated in a hotel
I tell myself this is all very cool,
and try not to feel death coming up
my throat

*west*

the songbirds, the sparrows
seem unbothered by the
running engine of the semi-truck
near them, they seem unbothered
by most of the comings and goings
in this city that sometimes feels foreign to me
and I walk past a sparrow who is
too ill to fly, it skitters away
but not very far, something
in me says "you could stomp on
that bird" and I feel repulsed
but mostly amused at how
outlandishly evil this thought is
-
a group of them take flight, worried
I am a predator, the ill
one remains grounded, and
the chirps of the birds come
back as the noise of that
engine fades, on this walk
that is becoming familiar
in this city
that can feel so alien

*almost home*

beauty usually strikes
me on this street,
a singular cloud in the sky,
birds perched in between barbs
of wire and on trees, near thistles
my neighbors, their dogs
in the park, baring their teeth,
exchanging greetings
a car rolls past
and I dig for keys

"Yeah, mom, thanks"

"I'm just worried."

"I get it"

…

"I think I should be going"

"Oh come on, -

"No, not because of that."

The exchange continues for a little bit, polite, terse, about nothing. Talking around issues in the way most families like this do.

The house has become much quieter since all the kids moved out. There's still remnants of them: A hard spot on the carpet from spilled milk, a dent covered by a painting from a rubber band catapult and a quarter, peeling vinyl stickers on a garishly blue bedroom wall.

At the sink the mom begins to choke up. She blinks it back and swallows, embarrassed, not really sure where it came from. The mortgage is almost paid off! She has three beautiful kids! A shout comes from the basement.

The dad is yelling at the tv, like his dad did.

The mom smiles, stares off through the window, into the backyard. She scrubs a dish. She scrubs the dish again.

On the highway home the daughter is going way too slow. People probably think she's on her cell phone, or drunk, or something.

She's staring off into the distance, a collection of red clouds joining the flat midwestern farmland somewhere in the horizon.

As the night sets in, the light in the yard back home flicks on. "It was nice seeing Tyler" says the dad, changing into a set of pajamas. Her transition lingers over the words, the weight seems like it is causing the whole room to sag, creating new orbits as the fabric stretches.

"Yeah, it was."

"He's really an adult now, I guess."

The mom hesitates.

“He is. All the kids are.”

“When did we get so old!”

They both laugh and roll into bed.

At home the daughter lays on a bed of her own and tries to feel profoundly sad. Instead she feels a sense of loss that scabbed over a long time ago.

Picking at the scab she tries to remember; her dad getting up in her face, fighting, saying awful things and meaning them.

In the darkness she chokes up briefly and sobs once, her face contorting in an attempt to silence it.

Upstairs, her neighbor must be watching something like a Michael Bay movie, a bass “whump” bleeds through the floor. Twisting herself up in her own sheets, she tries to sleep through the muffled story unfolding in someone else’s living room.

*slippage*

since we've started talking more,
when I look at you
I feel like I'm able to see a sprawl of
things beyond what you carry
into a room, beyond what you say

causes and effects
chains of events
linked to chains of events

and I see it in myself too,
insecurities and beauty
and all the human shit reflected,
diffusing into the room we now
share, and looking at you again
it seems like it's all slipping somewhere else,
I'm not sure it matters

*chart_with_upwards_trend*

what will this mean for the
economy, two dead six wounded,
several in critical condition,
a genocide somewhere we're
already forgetting, and the effects
of all this on the deficit
is unclear

a sigh of indifference, just
so long as the corpses are profitable

there are evil men who die happy
and friends who die young
but this has little bearing
on the financials of the situation

*that time my friend charlie kicked a duck in the park*

There's a fog, denser near the lake in the center of the park. It feels like the cold from the night before is lingering in each drop of water vapor, mixing with the warmth of the early morning sun. None of us have slept.

I can't remember what we were talking about now. It feels unimportant. It was idle chatter, pretending we'd still be friends after this last summer, that our childhood connections of proximity would never fade.

The mixture of cold and warmth feels nice on my face. The bags under my eyes seem to be melting away. My frozen, rosy cheeks warm in the sun. There's a duck in front of us.

We laugh at the duck, it's not particularly funny, but it's nice to laugh.

"I'm going to kick that duck" says Charlie.

No one says anything, we're not really sure we're hearing what he's saying.

"I'm not joking."

Charlie looks at us, pausing in place. He takes a few steps back, starts sprinting. All of this is happening very fast.

He lands a kick on the duck's neck. It lets out a quack before it flies off. The motion of its expanding wings startles Charlie, throwing him off balance. He stumbles a little.

We're all standing, looking at Charlie. He laughs, his eyes pleading for approval.

The duck is flying off still, fading into the background. Off of each speck of water vapor in this fog, there is a prismatic splitting of light. There's so many specks and so much light that it's impossible to take it all in, light refracting, bending. None of us know what to make of this moment; the light is bending around us regardless, pouring through our retinas, bouncing off trees, dissipating on dark colors and imperfect whites.

The moment passes, and none of us can help it slipping through our fingers before we understand. We didn't seem to mind, I'm not sure we even noticed.

*what it feels like*

life is floating in front of me
an expanse of fabric stretching on,
I can see the intricacies of the weave,
individual stitches, the texture
of it passing by

I'm with a friend, as it all cascades
on and on,

  crickets and cicadas through an open window soon to be frost
and silence,
I look at my friend
and she's smiling

a curtain moves with the wind
the light from the streets going
through the sheer fabric and into
my living room, I feel something
passing by

I want to ask my friend if she
sees it too, she's laughing now
and crickets and cicadas and the rustling of the curtains
and on and on
it keeps going, until it's gone

*morvern callar*

The sun is setting. I'm crossing kirby ave to the south, to cvs. I'm going to get food. I've basically been living off the gas station level meals this place provides. The grocery store is too far away. My partner and I don't have a car, and we can't drive anyway. She's moving out to new york soon, life with me down here was too slow. The glare from the setting sun makes me put up my hand as I check for cars. I am listening to Joyce Manor, things feel beautiful. The song is heart tattoo.

There's a cold spell 2 weeks after she leaves, I stop walking to the park after that. We're broken up but it's ambiguous enough that I am considering moving to new york. she might take me back, she's thinking about it she says. She's always had a limerant fixation on an old friend. It sat in the back of our relationship in a way I just assumed would be fixed with patience and kindness, but it wasn't, she said she loved this person too much to ever commit to our substantial, maturing relationship. They did not feel the same way about her.

I started going to dunkin donuts. I appreciated that the digital menu let you skip a sort of messy and unpleasant customer interaction, but it feels a little like I am not eating my vegetables. My voice has started to atrophy to the point that a phone call makes me hoarse after.

I've dropped out of a masters program. I say I dropped out but I mean I just stopped showing up. I lay in bed, I play guitar, I lay on the couch. My heart tattoo has healed poorly, the artist pressed way too hard, he was also transphobic. I sometimes wonder if he was trying to hurt me. I wonder what it means to have that on my body if he was. What it means to leave that unresolved.

I live with her in new york for a year. She drinks a lot for spurts. Starves herself. I start to starve myself too. I am so in love with her. She won't leave, she doesn't love me. It feels like cutting off a limb at the time, and I watched her wither for a month, homelessness, healthcare, poverty, problems I am now facing too.

*erosions*

I don't know where you're at now
if you left the country like you've been planning
or if you are still kicking around the same places
circling homelessness

and I don't know
why things are like this
I miss when I loved you
and you said the same
things always change

I still think about you
more than I would admit
in quiet moments, I wonder if you do
the same
things always change

*approximating*

I'm having a hard time
understanding anything
the words I'm using feel like
the bottom has fallen out
the syllables all separating
into vowels and consonants
and subvocalizations
or maybe nothing,
and I don't know what
there is to say or do
or anything or if I even
would want to or why
I'm here in this spot with these
things and these people
who seem just as confused
in their own way

I'm stumbling through
something and it feels
like living
in its own way
until the bottom falls out
and I'm on the floor
in this mess

*a study*

she tells me she's good
at sucking dick after,
and she is, before
I mentioned that the way I have been taking mdma
and fucking strangers as a trans woman
makes me feel like an anthropologist
studying queer people

the downwards mobility
I have been experiencing is so stressful
that I tell myself little stories and jokes
to make poverty seem distant

she's good at sucking dick
because you do a lot of that as a sex worker
I tell her I've been considering drug dealing
on the steps of her apartment
as she smokes a cigarette and starts to talk about audre lorde
and I'm pretending I don't even notice
how gorgeous she is

we talk about community
and looking out for each other
until I smoke a joint in an alley
and leave

*Martin Prince singing "Summer Wind" in The Simpsons*

She gets up, like most mornings, around 5 am.

The birds are perking up too.

The sunrise has been a moving target, more elusive than her usual wakefulness. This adds some texture to a life that has started to settle into routine again, she appreciates this.

She sits on the same bench in the park.

The morning begins to turn to something resembling summer heat. Sweat forms on her neck, a breeze runs over it.

Concrete under foot, on her way home. A dried leaf tumbles along the sidewalk, crumples against the bottom of her shoe. She doesn't think much of this.

Something pleasant catches on something coarse, the sun passing overhead.

7

*peanuts and brand name snacks*

toyota, base hit, go phillies
budweiser, walk, go phillies
it's so hot here, I didn't expect that
and neither did you all
and we're sweating until the rain comes
mcdonalds, strike 2, go phillies
make some noise!
I slap my thigh
one of us yells, drunk
falling over on the train
go birds
go phillies
pressed against each other
someone explains they
have season tickets
afterwards one of us says
that we can't even imagine
packing into that train
every day of the regular season
and he seemed so lonely
and a little unwell
and he seemed like a little bit of a joke
but sitting at home
alone in my bed
my hair still drying
it's less funny now

*scene*

there is a man in this venue
above him a vent is peeling away
from the ceiling, christmas lights wrapped around
failing supports and I don't want to make a scene
but is he harassing that woman
I'm fairly sure he's copping a feel
like I thought he tried to with me
and someone is yelling about the
enemy or the struggle or love
to distorted strings and drums way too loud
for this tiny basement

on the vent above the man
there is a defaced postage sticker
saying something about building a shrine and missing god
  I stared at it when I first got here
it feels too on the nose to be poignant now
why is it always like this

*mixtape*

I have a playlist
with her name, I added songs to it slowly
if they made me think of her,
sitting naked on my bed and cradling my guitar
and singing something gentle
that I couldn't make out
my stomach is pressed against her back,
her face inches from mine
smiling, eyes wide
I've stopped adding songs
I still think about her
when I am lonely
I wish I understood
what anything meant

*september 9*

riding in your car, signs
of 24 hour convenience and flags
in front yards, bridges, streetlights,
tollbooths, I feel like I can reach out
and touch the rot of the empire
spilling out of these suburban homes
-
no I haven't listened to abba really
and yeah it's nice to hear
the vocals layer,
through our open windows and
over these empty yards and off these
plastic-lined walls,
I look at the dried flowers
on your dashboard,
as we circle the block
and pass the same houses,
in my head I am anatomizing
the corpse of the dream
that once lived here,
I find it repulsive, the stench of death,
and the vocals in the chorus are
coming back, you were right about them

the anatomy of this place
is drifting from my head
as I feel the cooling summer nights,
the breeze slipping into your car

*resolution*

the notes grind against each other
like 3am staring at the ceiling
wondering if I'll ever actually do it
and it hurts
hitting the strings so hard that it strains
the fingerpick against my thumb and the vibrations
are violent under my left hand
and it hurts
I can't come home anymore
not that I ever really wanted to
and it hurts
all the time
like a low level ache in every muscle
straining against a force
that's not there

mom and dad bring up a hollow feeling
in my chest now, and static in my head
and I try to hear echoes and reverberations
of what used to be there

I can feel the shit in my chest
through the body of my instrument
and while the sound is unpleasant in the air
the sensation in my chest
is not

*bus home*

the transit hub is a point
of modern, metropolitan pride
for my hometown, trains, busses,
cars you can rent with an app, a sandwich chain
we talk about a lot in front of the double
sliding doors, heat escaping as they slide open
for those in transit,

I'm going to come out there I say
and I do
the truth was something neither of us could take

it all caught up with us,
starving ourselves of cold realities

I'm thinking of the sliding double doors
and the pain behind the bridge of my nose as I sobbed
watching a red and white bus pull  away with you

I'm listening to the tinny fan of a space heater
in my shitty basement apartment
somewhere thousands of miles
from that transit hub,
a point of pride

*soft thaw*

yesterday I stayed in, to avoid the ice
and it's still here this morning, but starting
to melt in the sun, heat radiating from the
cement underneath

I slip but don't fall a few times
on my way to a coffeeshop

iced coffee should not be five dollars

I read the poems of ed smith
in some anthology

"I don't like the way the world is changing-
but I like Large Cola Slurpees"
he says, and he complains
about some asshole who quoted his work
fucking up the line breaks

if this place sold large cola slurpees
I would have to take out a loan

on the walk back I see frozen dogshit
that someone flattened with a footstep

I'm walking up to each street corner
and looking down the sidewalks to check for ice
and taking the path
that seems clear

if that coffeeshop sold dogshit
I would have to take out a loan
if I liked eating dogshit

*chinese and american food to take out*

I am getting five mozzarella sticks
and nine dumplings
and whatever the people
at this chinese place
that used to be a liquor store
decide to throw in,
kids are playing in the kitchen
and there is a beautiful girl waiting
on her food too
and I stare at the wall
to pretend I don't notice
how beautiful she is

someone hands her two huge orders of fried rice
and to the right of me are slot machines
blinking for my attention, past the girl
it's hard not to gawk after she leaves
win now play now buy a ticket win now play now
win win win one thousand dollars
I would love one thousand dollars

above the machines is a sort of tertiary kids menu
wings and fried rice, shrimp and fried rice, fried rice
with other meats, and I'm trying to calculate which direction
five dollars is generous in
in this equation

on the full menu someone has
asked you to follow them
on some app,
and to stream
their, soon to be, smash hit
song of the summer
or winter,

they don't run the heat out front
and they still haven't removed the bulletproof glass
that served the liquor store from before

Advil, Aleve, Tylenol
blunt wraps, raw rolling papers, tops
chargers, headphones, something
that I can't tell what it is
other than sketchy
logos and slogans and candy
and I close my eyes, saturated
with brand messaging

there's a faint high pitched whine
from a heating duct or similar
that reminds me of the anti-homeless
speakers some stores have
I look around for the source

win one thousand dollars now
and my food is ready
and I say thank you
and it's all smiles

I love this chinese place
more than I can explain

*national weather service*

there will be 14 inches of snow tomorrow and a body count
that gets into my head
when the cold sinks into my bones
on my walk to the grocery store

I wince at the self checkout
It seems gauche that it says the price out loud
I feel a lingering fear staring at the same price
printed in plain black lettering on the screen,
it's building in my stomach

someone is sleeping on the pavement in front of
the store, they cover themselves before i can see them
I want to say it's ok
but the cold is sinking into my bones
and I'm barely thinking
about anything but how numb I am
and I can barely muster the desire
for something more tender
than the calloused hands of this world

muzak droning and boquets
already dying from the neglect
of overworked employees
making nothing, sensation returns
to my face, something cold on my cheeks,
blood rushing to my nose

earlier this morning
my head in my hands
my hands on my knees

I try to feel something
before I walk out my door

*delaware*

The delaware river splits around an island in front of my roof. Through the fog the lights of the benjamin franklin bridge look like irregular little suns, coronas and all. The same effect is present on headlights and makes it feel less special. I find myself drawn to the uninhabited island visually. It looks like the delaware is splitting, a branch up to new york and the atlantic, another up to the great lakes.

I stamp out the joint I've been smoking. I stretch, bracing myself against the railing.

I've been smoking a lot recently. Helps keep my head free of thought.

it's cold.

I'm going back soon. Not sure when. Weeks; New York, it's been 6 months? 7? some amount of time in philly. There was a cheap room that was nice near a girl I was head over heels for so I moved down, things fell apart before I even moved. Now they've fallen apart further. I was in New York for a year, also for a girl. I'm still not sure how much of this move down was for some woman I had no chance with, maybe distance will help but I doubt it.

I'm still in love with the girl I moved to New York for. I think of her more than I should.

I don't know why I'm like this, it's honestly almost funny.

Money is tight.

I keep choking myself with a belt until my vision gives out a little, around the edges

Two of my roommates at my last place were low level dealers "selling to friends" to maintain a habit. They were dating, it was abusive. One had the other's name carved into her body, when they broke up she told me it was a type of scar you can't tattoo over, I didn't know what to say. I hugged her. I was scared. She tried to kill herself.

I left for this hotel, overlooking the delaware.

Last night I thought I might be able to actually do it, the belt on my skin, but really I just do it to scare myself now. I've written a poem about the first time.

I looped it around my bedframe, it was more of an attempt then.

Money is tight.

I'm looking at the delaware again, the current visible from all this way, churning.

A train slips past on the bridge, I almost miss it.

I forget what I was thinking about. My eyes are straining against the fog, trying to discern shapes fading into the gray, possible predators, food, something to make me not so bored.

It's been flat for so long.

*note*

I'll pay rent
if I'm not here
I know how things are
and money is such fickle
bullshit, and I wish
I could promise I won't
leave

but I come and go too
like so much fickle bullshit
but don't worry I'll
leave a check on the counter
if I'm gone

*lifecycle*

someone is aggressively
explaining the rules of
tournament chess to someone
who has violated these rules
and their shouting
eventually fades into the
murmur of a crowd,
the sun is slanting into my eyes
a trolley rattles past
this feels like living
for a moment
-
I leave
and the sun goes down
and cicadas are doing
whatever outside my window
buzzing, humming
it seems complicated,
almost musical
their drones crashing
into each other surging
and fading, pulsing,
reminding me that this
is living too

*star wars, 1999*

darth maul, you got cut in half
and that runs through
my head a lot, you falling into
that pit, your body separating,
sitting in the theatre with my dad
the heat of the afternoon
glowing off the parking lot outside
and I love your glued on horns
and your badass make up and
your double lightsaber
you are so badass
and my dad sighs as he
asks for tickets for the second time
next week, and we go again
and I miss that
I miss that feeling
watching him walk ahead of me
the blacktop radiating heat
and the warmth in my chest,
the sun in my eyes
and darth maul I don't think you
could ever hurt me, bisected
in that pit, your lifeless body limp
next to mine, my dad with me
watching you die,
I hope you found some peace
in those final moments
darth maul,
your lightsaber is so
badass

*crossing*

a little ways back
a dad calls out,
how's it looking bud, to a kid
on a bicycle, wobbling slightly, a helmet
too big for their head, they slow
as they approach the intersection
and look both ways as they twist
the front wheel back and
forth to stay balanced,
and how's it looking bud
and they say good with a hesitation
and the dad tells them to cross
the intersection with a firmness
that knows people can get hurt
they hear the gravity in his voice
and they stop wobbling
before they cross the road

I smile, but something
in me is stuck on how you
can't protect those you love
from everything, but we try
anyways

across the intersection
the kid asks their dad something
childish, it slips away in the wind
and the dad laughs before answering
and I smile again but this
time it doesn't catch on
anything

*missouri, nevada*

how do you understand
a love that has curdled
to the point of
nothing, rotted away
the foundations destroyed
by termites
like that first
house you raised me in,
sliding down the hill it was built on
and I remember saying I hate you
and meaning it at the time
I was unsure, I still am

and can we play rough again
like we used to
coach, put me in
you taught me how
and I learned to love it
you, the smell of mowed grass
-
my face smashed against the floor
the rug bristling against my cheek

  where there once was warmth
there is absence, my beating
heart and contracting lungs
and a space where you were
I loved you
it hurt
and can it hurt like that again
the rug on my face,
your weight on my neck
an embrace of sorts

*Last contact*

Cold air whips against my face, my chapped lips. I'm thinking of the sound their breath makes through a blowhole, the low rumble of that mass of life retreating back through the surface tension of the water, the occasional tail. Sometimes I wonder if it was playful, a little wave, or maybe a cursory glance at a potential predator.

The spray of saltwater as we crest a wave reminds me of those same sounds; something salty on my tongue. It's been years since one's been spotted. They're saying that last time, the blowhole, the cresting back, the unmistakable black mass of a humpback whale that I remember might be the last time we see one. They try to track the population, pods, whatever, they tag them follow them around with radio signals. All of the radio tags have stopped moving, drifting to the ocean floor with carcasses unable to sustain themselves in what the oceans have become. They're saying in 10 years there might not be life at all in large parts of the pacific, not even those little fuckers I can't remember the name of.

I snap my head to a distant splash, just a large wave. There's someone at the front of the boat listing facts through a PA system for eager tourists who still think luck is on their side. This is the last chance to see one they tell each other, I'm glad we came out here, even if we don't see one, it's just you have to take the chance they say. A monitor plays videos of old, cinematic whale sightings. Not like the real ones, the distant crest only a bored child spots, staring off at the horizon, snapping to excitement telling their parents "I saw one! I saw one!" everyone looks at the empty horizon deciding which reality to believe.

When I was a kid my parents would take me out on birthdays. I wanted to be a marine biologist or something. I was too young to really understand careers, I just liked the ocean. They're playing whale song through the PA.

"This is whale song!" says the chipper marine biologist giving the tour. "These low frequency rumbles carry for miles and

miles in water, allowing whales to communicate basic sentiments and needs."

There's a surly teen trying to avoid their parents and not look seasick on the small boat who's pretending they're not interested. The biologist goes on to explain that as the whale population has declined the calls have not only grown infrequent but quieter, long range communication does very little for the whales other than signal their location to predators. The calls are more for other members of the same pod now. The teen looks at their feet, something queasy in their eyes. The biologist says if we don't "act now" we may never be fully able to understand whale song.

We pull back into the harbor empty handed, some seasick, some jubilant at just the boat ride, most bored. A little girl skips down the ramp to the pier, a worker tells her to be careful.

There are still seafood joints all along the coast, gesturing like we're able to pull anything from anywhere other than large industrial farms anymore. I think it's nice at least to have the view of the water, the setting sun reflecting off it. There used to be a fish market a few blocks down, it's still there, but now more of an "authentic" skin on the same shit you get at the supermarket, less fresh even because they keep it on ice and not in a fridge. Not that I eat much meat anymore, I'd get fishsticks when I came around here with my mom.

I'm remembering the warmth of her hand, the queasiness in my stomach of my first boat ride. My excited shouts as I point at a whale we are all already looking at. She doesn't even notice me, captivated by the whale. It's really close. Even the biologist on the boat seems startled, worried about the integrity of the boat maybe. As it inhales and dives its tail pokes up and there's a loud smack like your biggest friend just belly flopped, water everywhere, a mist on my cheeks, I'm smiling. We see a few more, distant, less exciting, still fascinating.

When we get back to shore I keep talking about it, mostly just asking my mom as I eat fishsticks if she "saw the whale", she

says she did. I get home and open presents I don't remember. My dad asks my mom "can't she talk about something else", she shoots daggers at him.

Until my teens every birthday is whale themed, my friends think it's kind of funny, dorky. But we're all dorky so no one really minds. Even during my teens I go out to spot whales; sometimes informally on friend's dad's uncle's boats. I stop getting queasy at sea. Eventually I ended up going to college in Illinois, rarely coming back to California solely off the momentum of geography. The tours slipped from my mind until I came out here again for a woman who I am no longer on speaking terms with. I loved her I said. That was three years ago. Around the time we last spotted a whale. Around the time I last spotted one. My mom would think it was all very funny if she were still here. She would say something sweet and nice and not fully get it in a way that would be comforting.

I missed her funeral. I've stopped talking to most of my family. They never really understood me as a lesbian and I never really understood them. I wish there was malice or anger there on either side but it's mostly just apathy and avoidance. Sometimes I wonder what she looked like in the casket, if it would have helped at all to see that, to say goodbye like that.

I wonder if my dad is alive, I barely register a feeling at this.

I'm looking out at what seems like an infinite expanse, the cold of the night biting at my shins and arms, something frigid blowing in off the water. Someone skates by in short shorts a bra kneepads, elbow pads, a helmet. I try not to stare. A bonfire on the beach, some kids drinking it looks like, they're loud and happy, listening to music. I try to smile, but all I really feel is the cold air. I take a drink from the iced green tea I bought a few blocks back, screw the cap back on. I start wandering down the beach path, someone bikes past, jogs past, walks past, bikes past, I pass a few gawking tourists. There's a shirt at a closed vendor where an airbrushed snoop dogg is saying to save the whales, he's smoking a big blunt. The shirt is $35.

In my bed I haven't showered, my hair still smells like salt, algae, and sweat, I wrap myself in it for a second and inhale. I usually go on these rides once a month or so, just a little reminder of my childhood more than an attempt to spot whales now, ambiance and company in a nostalgic setting. They still use the same boats on the tours I like. Fading wallpaper older than me on some of the walls, coral reefs, smiling dolphins, a dancing sea urchin. I imagine they're not going to be updating the fleet anytime soon.

I go out the next day.

The day after that.

The guy at the ticket booth laughs at me on the third day as I walk up and I decide not to go. I sit on the pier, watch the boat go out, come back. I wonder if they saw a whale but I know if they did there'd be more of a scene.

I start sitting on the pier instead, I can't really afford to shell out $80 for this shit every day regardless. It's nicer on the pier anyways, quieter, less branded. I pull a bowl of tofu and rice that was $15 out of a bag, eat it, drink some water, watch the sea, the day passes. My mom left me a sizable inheritance, so I've mostly been idle.

I think that conversation with the lawyer was the last time I spoke to my dad.

The sea is starting to warm with the seasons, I used to anticipate this, when the mist on the breeze starts to feel less biting and more pleasant. Now it's more of a spontaneous action, more fun, like the drop on a roller coaster. It's bad for the fish, if it matters at this point, just another problem on the pile of problems. I once saw that if the oceans get bad enough they could start eating up the atmosphere, literally suffocate the planet, deprive us of oxygen. This is such a bleak and sad scenario that it's kind of funny to me. No Mad Max no Waterworld just people quietly choking until one day we all stop breathing. I don't think it'll happen.

I'm eating a tofu bowl again. When I'm done I toss the plastic shit into the water in a fit of rage, I don't really know what I'm doing. The sun is hot on my neck.

I go home.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium used to let ocean water in to one exhibit, now walled off, the water would kill the kelp forest, and the fish, everything. They still use the ocean water, it's just filtered, some chemical process I'm unable to understand. You can still see the place they walled the massive interchange between museum and ocean. They still have a lot of good exhibits, I've heard.

I'm on a greyhound to Monterey to see it. My knees cramped against the reclined seat in front of me, my bag barely in the overhead compartment above. The highways are getting rough, the driver swerves to avoid the occasional pothole or runs over one and I glance up where my bag is, bracing for an impact against my head.

The bus is mostly quiet, people shuffling around the backrooms of a dying empire.

When we finally get off near my hotel you can feel the ocean in the air again and my knees feel like they've healed in some way as I stretch them down the bus stairs. I check in, sleep until it's too late to do anything good, order a pizza.

In the morning I go to the aquarium. Tickets are expensive but they're always expensive at aquariums, I ask for the student discount, the cashier smirks, applies it. I thank them.

"THE GREAT TIDE POOL", is printed on a sign above locked doors, "spot wildlife and watch the tide in Monterey Bay Aquarium's 'Great Tide Pool' a fixture-" "CLOSED" I head left to the large tank of kelp, fish swimming through it. I sit here for a long time. Light filters through the kelp in a way that paints the tank a very slight green. It feels messy and dirty and alive. The fish hide from guests as the fronds sway in the current of the tank, exposing the fish, inciting movement. Eventually some food drifts in from

above and there's a swarm of brilliant blues and yellows and dull grays and teeming schools of life in all sorts of colors.

I leave when it quiets down. You can hear the voices of people echo off the tank glass and windowless walls, it evokes the acoustics of a church but that feels too on the nose for what this place is. Some of the tanks are still sponsored by oil companies. When I was younger I though the executives did this more out of a guilt, an inability to live with what they are doing for short term profit. But now it feels like an insult, that they see me as a profitable animal that needs to be duped into being a compliant consumer. The exhibit is sea birds, I have a tattoo of a seagull on my right arm. There are no seagulls in this exhibit now, they're mostly considered pests now, not that they weren't before but they've moved inland as food sources in the ocean have dried up. Like aggressive pigeons; back home people make a sport out of kicking the sick or slow ones that don't flee on land.

Echoes of my childhood through exhibits that have been too underfunded to change much. I get the sense that most of the museums money has gone to fixing the filtered seawater problem. I get to that tank eventually. The one with a sea wall now. Dolphins do tricks in it, it's very impressive. I used to be angry we kept them in captivity, I'd turn to my parents, did you know dolphins live much shorter lives in captivity I'd say, my dad rolls his eyes, my mom says wow I didn't know that. I feel smug. I'm not sure these dolphins could live anywhere else now.

There's a small outdoor path with a rock wall next to the ocean. I walk out, look at the horizon. It's cold here up north still. The ocean here reminds me of the Atlantic, the shade of blue. I can hear waves crashing against the rockface below, I'm about 30 feet up. I can hear waves collapsing in on themselves back into water. A gust freezes me in place, my clothes pressed hard against my body. The last time I was here my mom was tired and my dad was angry and I was enamored, I remember ending the day feeling like an alien, sad and alone, thinking my feelings were childish and small.

I'm holding my phone, there's an outgoing call to my dad. He picks up. There's a voice. A weak voice, a creak I don't recognize in the hello. I start to cry.

"I can't hear you? Jessie is that you?" he says.

The gust has died down, the ocean crashes into the aquarium's curated path's rockface.

I don't know what to say, I end the call.

Something salty on my face.

*plot*
the moral arc of the universe,
well, it's more like a fabric a
warping mesh
of orbiting bodies

it all seems like
we're lost in some wrinkle
of night, drifting

the texture of carpet under my feet
brings me home,
somewhere unresolved